

Review of "Stereotypes, Ideology and Foreign Correspondents: German Media Representations of Ireland, 1946-2010"

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Rezension *Review*

PD Dr. Fergal Lenehan

„Stereotypes, Ideology and Foreign Correspondents. German Media Representations of Ireland, 1946 – 2010“

Melanie Neumann

Doktorandin am
Centre for British Studies,
Humboldt Universität zu Berlin
mit einer Promotion zum Thema
„Recent Irish and British Migration to Berlin“. Hier beschäftigt sie sich unter anderem auch mit deutsch-irischen Beziehungen sowie Stereotypen und Ansichten über das jeweils andere Land.

A country grazed by the most beautiful green throughout the year, thanks to the almost constant rain, with a population that just loves to talk – in fact can make a good story out of everything. A country that is still so remote and unworldly, that old fairy forts determine where roads and houses are built. A country where people gather by the fire of their local pub to sing their songs of suffering, rebellion and emigration, mixed with bouts of Whiskey and Guinness. We all know them, have heard them before, maybe even based our expectations of a holiday on them – depictions of Ireland and the Irish etched in the German mind, not just by Heinrich Böll, but even before the “Irishes Tagebuch” by German travel reports of Ireland from as early as the beginning of the 19th century. In his extensive study of media coverage of Ireland by the two German weekly newspapers “Der Spiegel” and “Die Zeit” between 1946 and 2010 Fergal Lenehan shows that these cultural generalisations are by no means limited to the regular’s table in your local pub, but are in fact utilised by German journalists to this day in their reporting on Irish affairs.

For his monograph, Lenehan has

identified and examined a total of 749 articles that dealt with the island of Ireland in “Der Spiegel” and “Die Zeit” during the said period. What he found in a wide variety of the articles was the use of stereotypes in two differing ways: firstly, as commonly held semantics referencing a kind of truth that is believed to be shared by a particular group – a long established, general discourse about a specific “other”. Secondly, stereotypes were used as a way to play with and challenge the readers’ expectations – making them aware of their stereotypical thinking, while at the same time exchanging one (the older) generalisation with a newer, adapted version of it. Looking at and examining cultural stereotypes in such a way makes for a pioneering and fascinating study. The more surprising finding to me, however, was Lenehan’s exposure of the ideological nature of many of the representations of Ireland and Irish life. Ireland was often depicted in these articles as being “at the extreme edge of Europe”¹ and “outside” of European norms (Sanders 1963). While this was often portrayed as something positive in the articles, contributing to Ireland’s uniqueness and charm, it – according to Lenehan – “implicitly places Germany at the centre of Europe, and may

be viewed [...] as a type of excluding Europeanism" (Lenehan 2016: 11).

"Stereotypes, Ideology and Foreign Correspondents" starts off with an introduction of the theories in use, giving a break-down of 'historische Stereotypenforschung', moving on to 'Metapherngeschichte' and further to theories on ideology, especially Europeanism. This chapter is, even though it deals with some of the most complex concepts of our time, very well structured and easy to apprehend, even for readers new to this field of study. Following on from this, Lenehan sets out to introduce the reader to Irish stereotypes in Germany through looking at representations of Ireland in German cinema starting with the pre-World War II period – a very intriguing excursion indeed, showcasing the consistent and uniform manner in which Ireland is portrayed for the German audience. The three following chapters look at "Der Spiegel" and "Die Zeit" during the periods of 1946 – 1986, 1969 – 1993 and 1994 – 2010 respectively. Each starting with a short historical overview of politics, society, culture and economy during the given time span in both Ireland and Germany. Lenehan then highlights the dominant themes of the articles themselves and gives a short overview of their content before discussing the stereotypes and ideological syntax used. One of the most striking findings in this regard is the focus on popular culture, literature and art in the coverage of the Republic of Ireland² throughout the whole time period and in both newspapers. However, while the initial focal point within this category is on literature in both papers, "Der Spiegel" slowly moves away from it and towards aspects of popular culture like music and cinema, with "Die Zeit" remaining focussed on literature throughout. Additionally, though there is tangible increase in German interest in Irish topics, especially during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the stereotypes themselves remain largely the

same with the depiction of the "drunk and rebellious Irish" being prevalent. A 1964 "Der Spiegel" article, for example, describes the funeral of Irish writer Brendan Behan thus: "In March of this year Dubliners – waiters and bar mixers, Gaelic drunks and bards, prison birds and former bombers from the (illegal) Irish Republican Army – carried their beloved drinker to his grave" (Behan: *Irishes Testament* 1964) and in a 2004 "Der Spiegel" interview with Irish singer Andrea Corr, the interviewer tells her: "After all, you and the other members of the group are seen as fun-loving Irish people, capable of drinking every British pop band under the table" (Böckem 2004). While these stereotypical portrayals and comments seem to decrease over the period the monograph deals with, they are still used in some of the articles towards the end of the time span or are substituted by newer ones adapted to the changing realities of life in Ireland, describing, for instance, "the new-Irish new-rich style" of the Celtic Tiger as well as what is seen as "typical" Irish behaviour: "at the foot of the castle, typically for rural Ireland, a rubbish heap with beer cans, lemonade bottles and oil tanks" (Luyken 1999). The abundance of Irish stereotypes in German press coverage, Lenehan convincingly argues, can be explained by the huge exposure to generalisations and stereotypes of Irish life within transnational popular culture, especially through US-American TV-series (e.g. *The Simpsons*), compared to the relatively irregular press coverage of Ireland in Germany, thus making it harder to effectively test or contrast these stereotypes. In order to familiarise the unfamiliar it is therefore often easier and quicker to draw on generalisations and stereotypes that are already there. He goes on to assume that German coverage of France would not be studded with as many stereotypes as media reports on France are much more regular and, as a result, there is more in-depth knowledge on the country than on Ireland; similarly coverage of Portugal

would not be as reliant on generalisations, as it is not as prevalent in popular culture and there thus would not be as many cultural stereotypes on the Portuguese stored in German ‘public opinion’³. A thesis that would be interesting to check.

In addition to achieving what Lenehan set out to do, namely to give an overview of German press coverage of Ireland, to trace changes, progressions and trends as well as to “provide an additional theoretical contribution to wider ongoing discussions regarding cultural-historical approaches to intercultural relations and transnational interconnections” (Lenehan 2016: 7), the monograph offers an interesting, even if subtle, comparison of journalistic practices, areas of interest and the general tone of the Ireland coverage in “Der Spiegel” and “Die Zeit”. However, while he quantifies the number of articles on certain topics, for example 99 out of 144 articles in “Der Spiegel” and 94 out of 204 in “Die Zeit” were on Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1993, he only sporadically gives concrete numbers of the articles in which certain stereotypes occur. Though this is not a quantitative study, I am convinced that it would have added to his argument to, for example, illustrate how often the “drunken Irish” occurred in articles on topics unrelated to drinking, such as the Troubles. At the same time, while he occasionally does focus on the journalists themselves and their background, this would have been interesting throughout, for instance, to see if the use of certain stereotypes was limited to some of the reporters. Additionally, while it is very eye-opening and interesting to see what was reported in Germany of events in Ireland, especially during the Troubles, and how it was reported, looking at what has not been said can often be even more telling. It would thus have enhanced the analysis to add information on events that elicited extensive press coverage in Ireland (and maybe the UK or the US),

but were not covered in a German context, although this might be a study in its own right.

Having said this, Lenehan’s study is a great achievement and distinctive contribution to transnational cultural history, in which he anchors this work, in general and Irish-German Studies in particular. While there have been a number of publications on Irish-German relations in the past 20 years, research on German media representations have been scarce and often only focussed on the coverage of one particular event (e.g. Kelly-Holmes / O’Regan 2004, O’Regan 2014). Lenehan, therefore, needs to be applauded for his extensive research and in-depth analysis of sixty-five years of German representations of Ireland in two of Germany’s elite weeklies.

Endnotes

1. The extracts from the German articles have been translated by Fergal Lenehan himself.
2. While from 1969 onwards the focus of the all-Ireland coverage is on the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the coverage of the Republic concentrates on literature rather than politics and economics.
3. A term borrowed from Lippmann (1998).

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